

Review of Primo Levi
Survival in Auschwitz

Michael J. Gilbert

HST 353

Mr. Carter

April 1, 2010

Survival in Auschwitz. by Primo Levi. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1958. trans. By Giulio Einaudi. 187 pages. ISBN# 0684826801. \$14.00 Paperback.

It is hard to review a holocaust account without comparing it with other accounts, but where books like Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Reha Sokolow's *Defying the Tide* are stories of the struggle of the human will against the dehumanizing process, Primo Levi's account is much colder. Levi's story of survival is much more about accepting his dehumanization and separating his mind from the rigors that his body is forced to endure. Some might read this book and feel that Primo became numb to the world and accepting of his fate, but it seems more likely that he believed that the only way he would survive was to lose his humanity.

The book begins with Levi's capture in December of 1943 and his deportation from Italy to Poland. He fills the book with his philosophical introspections and during this trip he realizes that even in the train cars, he and the fellow prisoners are being stripped of their identities and prepared for death. Upon arriving in Poland he writes "everybody said farewell to life through his neighbor. We had no fear."¹ Levi also details how they were striped down naked in the cold, their possessions put in piles and given new names, or rather numbers. Levi's number was 174517.² Not only was this number his new identity, but Levi also refers to these numbers as being ways to know where the other prisoners came from and how long they had been there. Instead of trying to hold on to his identity and his humanity like others that had written about their survival, Levi grew to accept his new identity fairly quickly. Levi was trained as a chemist before being captured and even though he departed with his old identity, he never stopped thinking analytically about his situation. His new life as something other than a human being had begun.

Like other holocaust stories, Levi tells his audience about the constant hunger, cold, sickness, and forced labor that the prisoners had to endure.³ This becomes a given in his account, Levi prefers to write about the creative ways in which people manage to get more bread, the better part of the soup, or scraps of cloth to alleviate these problems. For example, the prisoners made a good business of trading and stealing things from the Buna, a factory not far from the camp where they were forced to work and could come in contact with civilians because security was more relaxed. They would steal and smuggle brooms, wire, clothing, and anything else that might have value back to the camp in hopes of trading for someone else's bread or soup. The text is filled with different ways that the prisoners adapted to their new lives on the inside and how those that did not suffered for it.

Besides the economics of the camp that Levi describes, the hierarchy of the prisoners is also important to survival in the camp. Not only the hierarchy based on the nationality or ethnicity of the prisoners and their treatment by the German guards, but how they established their own hierarchy in the distribution of food and other goods. Levi tells us that a good relationship with the "Kapo" and "Pikolo" in the work "Kommandos" could mean more food for

¹ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Giulio Einaudi (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1958), 19.

² 27.

³ Not all the prisoners in the Lager were Jews, there were British and Russian POWs, political prisoners, and other sorts of "undesirables."

the prisoners.⁴ A description of the politics of the camp is not something that is lacking in Levi's book.

Primo Levi makes it clear that his survival did not depend on working the economic system or sucking up to the right person; in the end the arbitrary whim of fortune would make the difference between life and death. Levi gives credit to his survival to the fact that he was a chemist, this allowed him the chance to be selected for work inside trying to make synthetic rubber rather than working out in the cold.⁵ More importantly for Levi and his future writing career, he contracted scarlet fever as the Russians were moving closer to the camps near Auschwitz. This enabled him to be left behind while the other prisoners were marched onto almost certain death. While thinking about his good fortune Levi wrote "Strange, how in some way one always has the impression of being fortunate, how some chance happening, perhaps infinitesimal, stops us crossing the threshold of despair and allows us to live."⁶

If the reader is looking for some kind of inspirational message then this book is probably not for them. What this book is about is that man can be reduced lower than most people can imagine and by sheer luck manages to survive. When Levi explored his thoughts while writing about his experiences in the camp, he did not write about how a man has to hold his head up, but how when a man is reduced to the state of an animal he rather predictably acts like an animal or in his own case, resigns himself to apathy.

⁴ 109-110.

⁵ 139.

⁶ 131.